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Fixing I-405 first should help when Viaduct replaced

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If all the megaprojects in the state's new \$8.5 billion transportation package were built simultaneously, it would send Puget Sound-area traffic, and possibly the construction industry, into chaos.



Sky-Pix photo

The Legislature expects to charge tolls on some lanes of I-405 to cover part of the cost of new lanes.

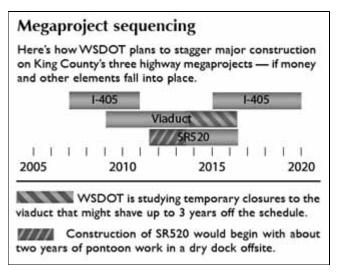
So Interstate 405,

which got nearly \$1 billion from the 2005 legislature, is first in line for what is expected to be a 16-year flurry of megaproject construction around Puget Sound.

The Alaskan Way Viaduct and the state Route 520 floating bridge won't be replaced without additional large infusions of cash, but the Washington State Department of Transportation is planning as if all the big projects will be built. "We've tried to order them in a way that makes sense primarily for managing traffic while construction is on the way," said David Dye of WSDOT.

WSDOT wants to relieve I-405's worst traffic chokepoints by 2010 and do little work on it while the Viaduct is under construction. Relieving I-405's bottlenecks would, in theory, make tearing down the Viaduct less disruptive to the north-south flow of traffic in King County.

"If you can make some capacity expansions on 405 early, 405 will relieve traffic on I-5," said Charlie Howard of the Puget Sound Regional Council. Howard said many drivers heading for Bellevue from south King County now detour north on I-5, then cross Lake Washington on I-90, just to avoid the regular backups on I-405.



The first five years would also

see major work in Seattle to replace the worn-out concrete of Interstate 5 and expand state Route 519 (South Royal Brougham Way).

The plan only works if voters say yes to another round of transportation taxes in the next year and a half, and if that round funds more work on I-405 south of I-90. With current funding, a \$150 million project to add lanes to I-405 between Northeast 44th Street and 112th Avenue Southeast would produce an isolated stretch of widened highway that would do little to improve traffic congestion.

In addition to giving road builders lots of money, the legislature ordered a statewide study of tolling and said it anticipates charging tolls on some lanes of I-405 to cover part of the cost of new lanes.

WSDOT traffic engineer Patty Rubstello said with current funding WSDOT is looking at putting in High Occupancy Toll lanes from state Route 522 in Bothell most of the way to SR 520, south of Kirkland. If a regional tax package materializes, WSDOT would consider putting HOT lanes along the entire 30-mile length of I-405.

Carpools and buses use HOT lanes for free. Solo drivers pay a toll, sometimes varying by the time of day or degree of congestion in adjacent lanes.

No HOT lanes exist in Washington, but a pilot project will test them on state Route 167 in south King County.

The new Tacoma Narrows Bridge, set to open in 2007, will have western Washington's first toll facilities since tolls were taken off the Hood Canal Bridge in 1985.

"The conventional wisdom says, Â'how can you ask folks in Pierce County to bear the brunt of the total financing of their bridge project and not ask people in Seattle and

Fast facts on 405

• The I-405 projects are all slated to be design-build jobs.

East King County to have similar responsibilities?" said Rob Johnson of the Transportation Choices Coalition.

On I-405, putting in HOT lanes could mean adding a new general-purpose lane and installing highway-speed electronic tolling systems on an existing HOV lane. Or WSDOT could add a new toll lane and have two HOT lanes side by side.

Rubstello said that I-405's HOV lanes are getting crowded enough that buses using them sometimes cannot maintain the speed they need to stay on schedule. Unless the new lane is a HOT lane, the current HOV lane might have to be converted to HOV-3, allowing only vehicles with at least three passengers to use it freely.

- Project sizes range from \$20 million to \$250 million.
- The first new project will get under way in 2007 with construction of a \$67 million overpass at Northeast Tenth Street in Bellevue.
- According to WSDOT, aggressive stormwater treatment for all new paved surfaces will actually improve water quality downstream of the highway.
- The current project team is led by WSDOT, HNTB, HDR and Parsons Transportation Group.
- Additional consultants include: McGowan Environmental, Mirai & Associates, Wilkinson Ferrari & Co., PRR, Anchor Environmental, Certified Land Services and Wilbur Smith Associates.
- Web site: www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/i405/.

WSDOT project engineer Kim Henry could not estimate how much money tolls might bring in.

"We're looking to use HOT lanes as a way to maximize efficiency of the roadway, not to maximize revenue," he said.

Rob Johnson said if efficiency is the goal WSDOT would have a hard time justifying adding a general-purpose lane.

"If you really want to increase the efficiency of the roadway, you have to start looking at alternatives like HOT lanes," he said. "Believe it or not, they carry more people."

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